

The New York Times

# Dining Out



Photographs by Thomas Dallal for The New York Times

**A CHEF ASSURED**  
Daniel Boulud at work at Daniel, where a basket of madeleines, above, is served with desserts.

## RESTAURANTS

*William Grimes*

# In New York, Promise Fulfilled

**W**HEN Daniel opened in January 1999, expectations ran high. Very high.

The old Daniel had earned its way, over time, to a rating of four stars from this newspaper, and the dining public expected nothing less from the new Daniel, in the grander surroundings of the Mayfair Hotel. I found the new Daniel mildly disappointing and a little rough around the edges, with too many dull dishes. There was brilliance, but a flickering brilliance. The decor was stodgy and awkward, the lighting harsh. I gave the restaurant three stars.

Two years later, Daniel has moved for-

ward, and upward, with grace and assurance. It is now the Daniel that New York wanted and expected all along, a top-flight French restaurant, sumptuous and rather grand, but still very much the personal expression of its chef and owner, Daniel Boulud. The horrid sculpture has been removed from the dining room. Striped silk curtains across the archways have softened the architecture, and revised lighting now suffuses the dining room with a flattering, roseate glow.

The soothing atmosphere is only partly a matter of fabric and lighting. There's a definite tone at Daniel, a warmth usually associated with small neighborhood res-

taurants, and it emanates from the kitchen. Mr. Boulud has both feet planted in the rich gastronomic soil of the Lyonnais region, an area renowned for its robust, no-holds-barred cuisine. His personality, as a proprietor, has been shaped by the little restaurant that his parents once ran, and if he does not actually stand outside on the sidewalk greeting guests, there is an unmistakable spirit of generosity hovering over the dining room that makes Daniel unique. The name says it all.

If Daniel has a fault, it is that Mr. Boulud offers too much. His menu is overwhelm-

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## RESTAURANTS

### In New York, a Promise Fulfilled



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**GRANDEUR MODIFIED** The décor at Daniel, on the Upper East Side, has changed a bit since it opened in 1999.

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ing, with a dozen appetizers and ten main courses supplemented by a daily list of specials and assorted tasting menus. The dessert menu is two menus, with a second page devoted entirely to chocolate. The wine list comes in two bound volumes.

This all adds up to a lot of reading, and painful choices. The diner who orders the sublime *velouté* of mussels, sweetened with carrot and spiced precisely with a few specks of cumin, must forgo the sea scallop *ceviche* in a clean, bracing oyster-water nage touched with horseradish, lime and sea urchin. Rarely have I experienced so much distress in ordering dinner, or witnessed so much around-the-table envy once the food arrived. Mr. Boulud's go-for-broke menu inspires greed. You want it all.

Mr. Boulud's style is a seductive blend of qualities, robust and delicate at the same time, like a big-engine car that hits top speed with the merest toe-touch on the accelerator. His reductions are so deep they have no bottom. His love of peasant

ingredients like sardines, anchovies and pork bellies leads him into daring, wrong-side-of-the-tracks flirtations that somehow work out, like his braised pork belly and stuffed pig's trotters served with lentils and root vegetables in a black truffle jus. At the same time, he plays a deft, subtle hand with high-risk spices like cumin, and he revels in clear, pristine flavors. That oyster-water nage, for example, is pure essence of ocean.

Best of all, Mr. Boulud is ceaselessly inventive in a free and easy way. Anyone worrying that French cuisine might be running out of gas should browse through a week's worth of menus at Daniel. The influences come from all over the Mediterranean, and as far afield as Japan and India, pulled in and made French with total assurance.

Tuna tartare, an overworked dish if ever there was one, rates as much more than an also-ran at Daniel.

It starts with bluefin tuna of a quality that makes it seem almost like a different fish. A dab of *sevrega* caviar puts it in the luxury category, and it picks up speed with a racy blend of wasabi, cucumber and radish. A light wash of lemon coulis punctuates the flavors and ties the package together.

One of the more intriguing dishes on the menu is cod crusted in black truffles, served on a rustic bed of lentils and root vegetables in a mushroom broth. The cod, a fairly bland fish, becomes supercod, its meltingly tender meat suffused with the tang of smoke and earth. Cumin works its potent magic in roasted squab with a deceptively simple garnish of spiced

spiced with just a hint of cumin transforms the dish. One by one, the flavors begin to bounce off each other, like popcorn kernels popping under heat.

There are lots of pleasant surprises like that at Daniel, culminating in a dessert menu remarkable for its elegance and restraint. The left side is devoted to fruit desserts, the right to chocolate, and it's understandable if eyes tend to drift rightward. I felt sorry for the lighter-than-air warm almond cake, almost a horizontal soufflé, served with muscat-raisin ice cream. How could it hope to upstage the glamour parade just across the way, led by thin leaves of chocolate filled with *gianduja* and amaretto or the glistening, nearly black chocolate bombe, a smooth sphere that opens up to reveal an inner core of cassis, vanilla *crème brûlée* and cashew nougat?

It is highly advisable to study the cheese trolley when it rolls around. The selection is well organized, the cheeses superb. The *Selles-sur-Cher* at Daniel was the one I hoped to find, but did not, when I traveled in the Loire earlier this year.

By the time the cheeses come into play, it has become abundantly clear that the wine list can lend full support. Jean Luc Le Du, the sommelier, has developed Daniel's list into a thrilling document, strong on classic French wines and top producers, but also filled with fascinating side trips, and subsections that feature specific producers, or even specific vineyards, in depth. Etienne Guigal, to take just one example, is represented by two dozen *Côte Rôties* from three vineyards.

#### Daniel

★★★★

60 East 68th Street, Mayfair Hotel;  
(212) 288-0033

**ATMOSPHERE:** Classic French cuisine with international accents, in a luxurious hotel dining room.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES:** Scallop *ceviche* in oyster-water nage; mussel *velouté*; truffle-crusted cod; pork bellies and stuffed trotters with lentils and root vegetables; squab with spiced pineapple and chickpea fries; tuna tartare with caviar, wasabi and lemon coulis; almond cake; chocolate bombe with cassis and *crème brûlée* filling.

**SOUND LEVEL:** Medium.

**SERVICE:** A model of professionalism.

**WINE LIST:** An outstanding list, tilted toward French wines but highly international. Broad and deep, it has a good selection of half bottles and wines by the glass.

**PRICE RANGE:** Lunch, one course, \$28; two courses, \$36; three courses, \$45. Dinner, three-courses, \$78; five-course tasting menu, \$105; eight-course tasting menu \$140.

**HOURS:** Lunch, Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 2:30 p.m. Dinner, Monday through Thursday, 5:45 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5:45 to 11:30 p.m.

**CREDIT CARDS:** All major cards.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Entrance a few steps west of the main door.

Past restaurant reviews from The New York Times, with additional capsule reviews by Times critics, are available on New York Today: [www.nytoday.com](http://www.nytoday.com)

#### WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) Poor to satisfactory  
★ Good  
★★ Very good  
★★★ Excellent  
★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

#### ON THE WEB

**SPECIAL FEATURE:** A video visit to the restaurant and a demonstration by the chef:

<http://www.nytimes.com/restauranttour>

#### A Four-Star Lineup

Daniel is among six restaurants given a four-star rating by The New York Times. The others are Bouley Bakery, on Sept. 15, 1999; Lespinasse, on Dec. 2, 1998; Le Cirque 2000, on Oct. 1, 1997; Jean Georges, on June 6, 1997; and La Remise.

by the glass and modestly priced bottles.

Service has never needed any improvement at Daniel. Confident and expert, it goes a long way to explain the neighborhood's love affair with Daniel. Diners feel well cared for. There's none of the hovering that passes for attentive service at lesser restaurants. The tone is pitch-perfect, and as a result, patrons feel at ease.

Perhaps too much at ease. Many are the gentlemen who saunter in their blue blazers with gold buttons open and flapping, exposing a wide expanse of shirt with no tie. Daniel is their place, warm and inviting. They feel at home. Home just happens to